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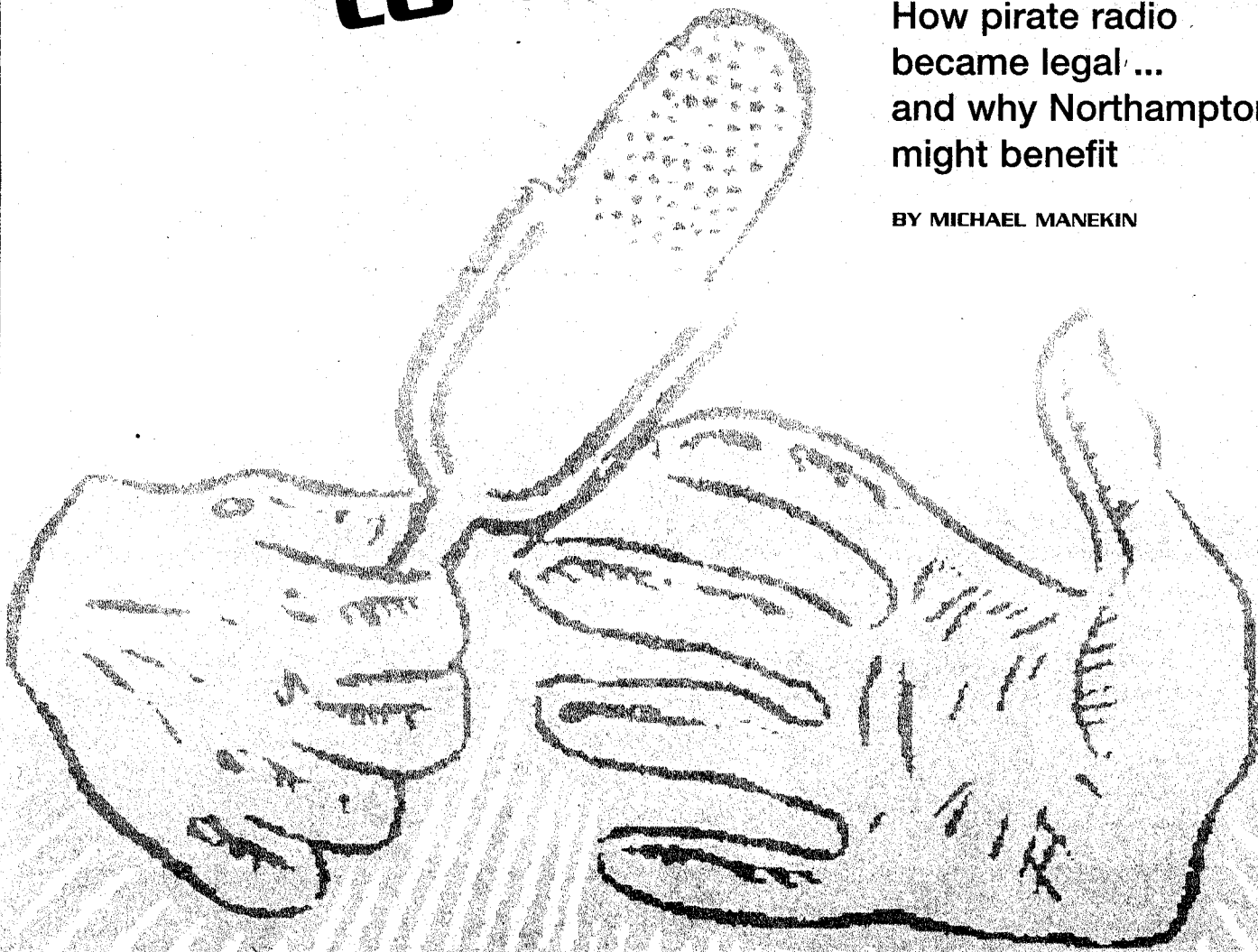
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## (LOW) Power to the People

How pirate radio  
became legal ...  
and why Northampton  
might benefit

BY MICHAEL MANEKIN



In a fluorescent-lit basement at Northampton's Unitarian Meeting House, two dozen radio geeks and social activists are staring at a guy with this huge Fidel Castro beard, black nerd glasses and an antenna on his T-shirt. His pirate alias is Pete Tridish ("petri dish"), and, for the last hour, he's been telling them how to start a low-power FM pirate radio station — legally.

At 31, Pete is one of pirate radio's Bluebeards, a hardcore activist with a broadcast engineer's brain, a secret identity and convictions a little to the left of the Left.

Pete may also be the only anarchist radio pirate funded by the Ford Foundation.

His Prometheus Radio Project, a bonafide legal non-profit organization, is also funded by Wall Street mogul George Soros.

The project happens to be the culmination of 100% illegal pirate radio activism.

"I like the idea of breaking bad laws," Pete explains. "If there's a bad law, the best way to change it is not really to write your congressman — but to break it."

When Pete co-founded Prometheus with several pirate buddies, the idea was to take all the on-air glory of pirate radio — local news, local people, unconventional points of view, good old fashioned fun — and make it legal.

Now Pete drives across the country with a cell phone and a trunk full of bizarre radio equipment, clocking miles on his 1993 Ford Escort (172, 460) and spreading the gospel of radio revolution. It's a nice racket. He's even got upstanding corporations pouring grant money in his gas tank. They respect Pete's considerable work, and want to further him along.

site to put the antenna and dozens of nit-picky FCC requirements fulfilled. If they succeed and the license is granted, what they'll need, above all, is cash.

Why bother?

Well, the average American household has (between the clock radio, the car radio, the walkman, the stereo, the shower radio no one uses, the lost-in-the-kitchen-drawer radio) approximately nine radios. If your American household happens to have zero radios, then you can buy one at a yard sale for a few bucks.

In this age of satellite TV, e-whatever and the all-holy Internet, many think of radio as not only antiquated but less than useful. It's the digital age, they say. Why not start a website or an online digital radio station?

Radio may be an old medium, but more people in this country can listen to the radio than watch television or log online. Less than half the U.S. has access to the Internet, and a much smaller percentage have computers quick enough to bother with online radio.

After nearly a century, radio is still the people's medium. And for low-power radio advocates, people are not "listenership" or "market share." They're people, and they've been systematically cheated out of the airwaves.

The Valley Free Radio Collective wants a fraction of those airwaves. "We're trying to provide an outlet for progressive views outside the mainstream," said Will Hall, founding member of the Valley Free Radio Collective. "We're trying to provide access for people in the community who are under-served by the media. And we're trying to provide an alternative to corporate control of the media."

By law, the FCC is supposed to issue licenses with the least infringement on free speech. Here's the catch: Ninety-eight percent of the country's licenses belong to commercial stations and National Public Radio (NPR) affiliates. According to Dunifer's lawyers, the FCC was not doing its job. When so few have access to so much, is the FCC really issuing licenses with the least infringement on free speech?

The judge decided that the argument had constitutional merit and refused to issue the injunction. Dunifer didn't just go back on the air. He opened up a storefront station for Radio Free Berkeley, and began selling mail-order low-power FM radio kits — complete with instructions — for the discount price of \$700. He sold hundreds and hundreds of them to aspiring pirates.

One of his first buyers was Pete. Before Pete became a pirate, he was a solar energy major at Antioch College. Pete likes to call LPFM the solar energy of the '90s, "a repository for Movement geeks." As a lifelong activist, he'd always seen media activism as less immediate and more abstract than, say, organizing people to speak out against poor public housing in Philadelphia.

But years of protest taught him that media matters. "We'd make a bunch of signs," he said, "and go out and lock ourselves to things, and get a three second soundbite on TV." Then his opponents would spend ten minutes on the evening news reasonably explaining their point of view. "I felt like my activist friends are every bit as articulate and reasonable and capable of expressing themselves and debating as these guys were, but we weren't seen equally by the mainstream media."

In February, 1997 Pete Tridish, Millie Watt, Bertha Venus and Noah Veil stormed the airwaves, and declared themselves

# LOW Power to

## How pirate radio became legal ... and why Northampton might benefit

In the '90s, Pete and a bunch of radio pirates declared war on the Federal Communications Commission, and — astonishingly — it worked. The FCC caved in. And now, for a limited time only, they're issuing more than a thousand non-commercial low-power FM (LPFM) licenses to eligible community groups.

All over the country, they're filing their applications: Haitians and Hassidic Jews in Brooklyn, right-wing militias in Michigan, hip-hop heads in Atlanta, big city anarchists, small town Christians. There's even a guy in the Midwest with an underwater microphone, some dolphins and a big tank of water. He's filing an application for all-dolphin, all-time radio. In total, more than 3000 organizations are responding to this one-time only, act now, don't delay offer from the FCC.

Welcome to the oxymoronic land of legal pirate radio.

First, let's talk illegal pirate radio: Whether you are broadcasting at 100,000 watts or less than 1 watt, you are transmitting illegally unless you have a license from the FCC. Low-power FM is radio at 100 watts or less. Although ranges vary, 50-100 watts worth of LPFM will pretty reliably get you a 7-mile diameter of listenership.

Estimates indicate that a 100-watt LPFM station in Northampton could reach a 20-mile wide circle, and transmit to Easthampton, UMass Amherst, Florence, even Williamsburg.

"It's never been this easy to get a radio station in history," Pete tells the local radio geeks and activist freaks at the Unitarian Meeting House. These people are part of the Valley Free Radio Collective, and by June 11, if Northampton's going to have a community radio station, they must complete a rigorous FCC application.

To be eligible by the FCC, they'll need the support of an established non-profit organization, a studio space, a

There are some 12,000 radio stations in the country, and only 200 are community stations. Ever since the Telecommunications Act of 1996 obliterated restrictions on monopoly media ownership, a handful of big corporations have been feeding ravenously on smaller television channels and radio stations. In radio, behemoth media groups like Disney have consolidated \$70 billion dollars' worth of stations. Clear Channel Communications, the largest radio giant, owns 1200 stations. That's more than 10% of the country's radio spectrum. Prior to the Telecommunications Act, corporations could only own 100 radio stations.

In the summer of 1997, more than a year after the 1996 Telecommunications Act passed, Pete took an on-air phone call at Radio Mutiny, the pirate station he helped start in Philadelphia.

"Is this Pete the Pirate?"

"Yeah. Who are you?"

The guy on the phone was a small-time radio mogul. After starting out in radio as a teenager sweeping floors, he'd risen to become the owner of three commercial stations. He explained that the Telecommunications Act was putting him out of business. He couldn't compete with the Disneys and Clear Channels of the world, and was selling out while his stations could still get a decent price. The thing was, he told Pete, he'd been in radio his whole life. It was his passion, and he didn't know what else to do.

"I'm thinking when I sell my stations," he said, "I'm going to start a pirate station."

In the '90s all sorts of people got the same idea. They felt shut out by the mainstream corporate media, and decided to fight back. Stephen Dunifer, a free-speech activist in Berkeley, California, really set the ball rolling. When the FCC tried to shut down his Radio Free Berkeley, Dunifer refused to pull the plug. So the FCC got an injunction and hauled him into court. But Dunifer's lawyers used an unusual defense.

the media. Thus was born Radio Mutiny, home of West Philadelphia's "anti-profit, all volunteer" community radio.

"It was a great, great station," Pete said. In its day Radio Mutiny's programming included "Incarceration Nation," hosted by an ex-convict; "Africa Report," hosted by a veteran of apartheid-era activism in South Africa; shows on public health, labor issues and, most importantly, progressive coverage of local news. Radio Mutiny was also a lot of fun. DJs spun klezmer, cheesy French pop songs, hip-hop ("usually all in the same hour," Pete said), and one woman regularly offered up sex tips over a K-Tel disco soundtrack.

In November, 1997, the FCC came knocking and shut them down. Three days later, the Radio Mutiny DJs set up shop in front of Benjamin Franklin's printing press in downtown Philadelphia, flipped the "On Air" switch one last time and unfurled a very large banner: "1773 — Benjamin Franklin defies the British, printing Poor Richard's Almanac without a stamp from the British crown, 1997 — Radio Mutiny defies the FCC for free speech on the air waves." For every station the FCC shuts down, they announced, Radio Mutiny would establish ten.

Radio Mutiny embarked on the first of several nationwide pirate radio workshop tours, establishing dozens of illegal stations. But, after a couple years in the pirate radio racket, Pete hit a philosophical glass ceiling. "I felt we couldn't just have a radio station for the unreasonably foolhardy," he said. "It had to be a radio station for the entire community. And the only way we were going to be able to do that was to go legal."

Prometheus was the Greek god who captured fire from the gods and delivered it to humanity. The Prometheus Radio Project's logo depicts one hand passing a flaming microphone to another hand. When Pete started the project in September, 1998, pirate radio activism was heating up, and rumors were starting to fly.

The FCC was talking about legalizing low-power FM.